

May 2004 - San Diego Union Tribune: County's child aid office faces job layoffs

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A \$12 million budget shortfall is forcing the county agency that collects child support payments to consider laying off up to 160 workers and demoting 40 others, raising worries its already low collection rate may drop.

The shortfall in the Department of Child Support Services is 22 percent of the agency's annual \$55 million budget, and the layoffs could affect 23 percent of its 700-member staff.

The agency already has more than 100 job vacancies and has cut travel, training, printing, overtime and other expenses.

The proposed agency reductions are part of a larger county effort to close a \$151 million budget gap by eliminating 983 vacant positions and laying off 394 workers. The county will decide on layoffs in June, and it must balance its budget before the new fiscal year begins July 1.

Children's advocates are concerned that cutting the child support staff could lead to lower collections and more families enrolling in welfare and social service programs.

"The leading cause of welfare dependency is the lack of collecting child support," said Geraldine Jensen, president of the Association for Children for Enforcement of Support.

The nationwide collection rate on current support owed was 58 percent in fiscal year 2002, according to the latest information on the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement Web site.

Jensen has long been frustrated with collection rates being lower in San Diego County and in California. Those two entities collect in the 40-percent range for current support owed.

One of the reasons blamed for the low rate is because California and South Carolina are the only two states in the country without a statewide automated child support collection system.

San Diego County handles 136,000 active child support cases. Cases are automatically referred to the child support services when parents of children go on welfare. Other cases involve parents who have problems arranging child support payment on their own.

A study released in February by The Urban Institute, a nonpartisan policy research organization, estimated California saved at least \$233 million in fiscal 2001 by collecting child support for families that otherwise would need food stamps and other public assistance.

Last federal fiscal year, county collections totaled \$155 million, of which \$50 million went to reimburse the state and federal governments for welfare provided to low-income families.

Parental plea

De Anza Bandow, a single parent who has been struggling to get child support from her son's father, said the county needs to do a better job of collecting child support regardless of its financial condition.

"I know women who have lived in cars with their children" because they didn't get child support, Bandow said. "It's a horrible plight."

The county's collection rate during the past five years has steadily increased from as low as 27 percent to 41 percent mostly recently. Thomas Boardman, who became head of county child support services in 2001, is worried about his agency's ability to maintain the gains it has made.

"I think there is serious risk of us not being able to stay up above 40 percent on current support collections because of the staffing cuts," Boardman said.

In making cuts, he said he first will reduce resources for collecting child support for out-of-state parents and for welfare reimbursement. Local cases where welfare isn't an issue will get first priority, he said. "We will manage it so that it doesn't negatively impact San Diego County residents," he said.

A federal fine levied against California for failing to create an automated collection system is to blame for part of the budget shortfall in child support services. Last year, under then-Gov. Gray Davis, the state decided to bill counties for a portion of the \$195 million fine. San Diego County's share is \$3.1 million. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger also has proposed keeping \$39 million the state has historically awarded counties for collecting child support to reimburse the welfare system. The change would start July 1.

The county counts on the reimbursement money to get matching funds from the federal government to raise nearly \$9 million.

The only one

State officials say San Diego is the only one of California's 58 counties that reinvests the reimbursement money in child support collections. Other counties use the money for different programs.

State officials said the reimbursement money is in addition to the state's annual allocations to counties for child support services.

Nancy Stone, regional administrator for the California Department of Child Support Services, defended the governor's budget because it maintains the annual allocations at the same level as this year.

"Given our budget situation, it's a pretty good place to be," Stone said.

The state faces a budget gap of as much as \$17 billion, despite voters in March approving a \$15 billion bond to pay off some of the deficit.

Boardman said he has asked the Office of the Legislative Analyst to convey to the governor the dire consequences of cutting the reimbursement money. Some of his staff members have started a phone-and-letter campaign to their state elected officials and the governor.

"Those who find themselves most likely to be dismissed are highly qualified, under-employed and settling for a less than comfortable lifestyle so they may serve the public," wrote child support officer Michele O'Donnell. "That a revenue generating agency, such as DCSS, is preparing to lay off 23 percent of its employees is inexcusable."